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COVER STORIES

Disarming Threat To Stability

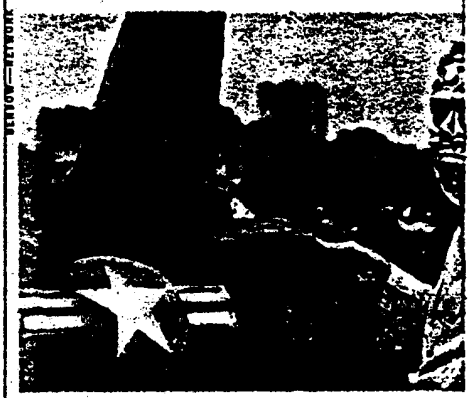
Nuclear foes would change the course of Europe

It began quietly in 1979, almost as an echo from a bygone generation. Pastors delivered sermons on the virtues of peace. Antiwar groups, some with their roots in the '50s, passed out petitions and organized small demonstrations. Communist parties drummed up predictable anti-NATO sentiment. But gradually, as anger and fear began to take hold, the movement reached beyond its traditional constituencies, taking on a dimension that surprised even its organizers. Finally, this autumn it reached a crescendo. More than 2 million Western Europeans have demonstrated so far in the streets of the Continent's major cities—and weekend after weekend the huge parades go on.

It is an astonishing display of concern. The protesters are primarily young, but older people join in as well, swelling the ranks from curb to curb, wall-to-wall humanity stretching as far as the eye can see. Some of the demonstrators wear elaborate costumes, macabre bursts of imagination that pantomime the approach of death. Others carry posters and papier-mâché displays, an explosion of street art mocking the U.S., tearing with outrageous simplicity at the fabric of mutual interest that the U.S. and Western Europe have woven so patiently for 30 years. The signs vilify: "We are not America's Guinea Pigs." "Today's Children are Tomorrow's Dead," "Reagan: Your Bomb will not be our Tomb." The chants taunt: "We don't want to fight Reagan's War," "No Euroshima."

The demonstrations are mounted by a heterogeneous, loosely linked but powerful coalition that has become a formidable political force in Britain, West Germany, Italy, Belgium and The Netherlands. It threatens, if unchecked, to make NATO a useless concept, to strain beyond tolerance the deep but subtle ties that link America with the continent it has twice fought to defend in this bloody century, and to imperil the very ability of the West to stand, free and united, against the encroach-

movement is to reverse a 1979 NATO decision to deploy a new generation of U.S.-built nuclear missiles in Western Europe starting in late 1983. But some of the movement's leaders are already arguing that the campaign should not cease until nuclear weapons are banned from the entire Continent, a condition that would leave the Western European countries vulnerable to the overwhelming preponderance of the Soviet Union in conventional arms. The driving force of the movement is a feeling that Europeans have lost control of their future, that they could be incinerated in a war between the superpowers. In West Germany, the



starkest of the protest slogans hits closest to the gut of the matter: *ICH HABE ANGST* (I am afraid). It is a feeling being articulated across Europe by a frightened young generation, and by its elders too.

Against this seething background, the ill-timed and almost casual comments of President Ronald Reagan, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and Secretary of State Alexander Haig about how NATO would use nuclear weapons in Europe, about how a "limited" nuclear war could be fought, were incendiary. Even though the remarks were only restatements of long-held alliance doctrine, they served to persuade more and more Europeans to view the U.S. as a menace to their survival, and, conversely, to give the benefit of the doubt to the Soviet Union's well-calculated rhetoric of peace. Joseph Luns, NATO's outspoken Secretary-General, noted the ultimate irony: "There is a greater fear of the weapons NATO is to deploy than of the weapons the U.S.S.R. has already deployed." Alarmed by the antimissile movement's challenge to the Western alliance, France's President François Mitterrand, a firm believer in U.S. defense policies, said during his visit to the U.S. last month: "As soon as possible, the U.S. should take the initiative, catch the ball while it is in the air. If it does not seize this opportunity, European countries will feel compelled to speak up and could be pushed deeper into the psychological and moral crisis we see them in today."

In his speech last week (*see* NATION), President Reagan moved to seize the opportunity. In offering to drop plans to deploy U.S. intermediate-range missiles if the Soviets dismantle theirs, he tried, belatedly and for the first time, to allay Europe's roiling fears. He also sought to undercut Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev, who had skillfully exploited America's essential and long-held views on nuclear strategy to portray the Soviet Union as the only superpower devoted to the search for peace (*see* ESSAY). While Reagan's proposal was hailed by Europe's leaders, the reaction of the peace groups was ambivalent. They took credit for forcing the President to act, but claimed he had not gone far enough, and made it clear that they would continue their campaign.

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